

Beuys' Primordial-Rabbits or How Joseph Beuys Discovered Rabbits

Joseph Beuys, that primordial rock of the arts, refers again and again to rabbits throughout his vast and fascinating oeuvre. He identified with these animals to such a degree that he formulated sentences like: "I am not human, I am a rabbit," "I am a very sharp rabbit," "The rabbit that I am," etc.



The rabbit is an animal charged with symbolic power and ancient mythological meanings. In the Germanic world spring was a rabbit; the Egyptian goddess Unut wears a rabbit on her head; for the Chinese and the Aztecs the rabbit was a moon animal; the Tartars saw the rabbit as the creator of light; the Christian Middle Ages knew it as a symbol for the resurrection of Christ—to name a few. Joseph Beuys called the rabbit an "organ of the people" and saw the animal as an "external organ." Beuys assumed that the rabbit had "...a direct relationship with birth...For me, the rabbit is a symbol of incarnation. Because the rabbit does in reality what man can only do in thought. He digs himself in, he digs himself a hollow. He incarnates himself in the earth, and that alone is important."

Joseph Beuys' work is often reduced to being only made of felt and fat. These are certainly two key materials occupying an important place in his art. However, the equally important role that rabbits play is overlooked. In his first public action *Siberian Symphony* in 1963 Beuys had already used a rabbit as a reference point, as a partner, and as a central figure; and for the very same reasons he used felt and fat.

Flying a JU 87 in 1944, Beuys was hit by Russian anti-aircraft gunfire but managed to make it over the front line. Nevertheless, because of a terrible snowstorm he crashed in "a complete wasteland atop the bottle rim of the Crimea." The Tartars living there found the badly injured and unconscious man. The Khairtdinov family tended to Beuys as best they could. They rubbed his injured, wound-covered body with animal fat, wrapped the battered body in felt blankets, and put burning candles by his bed. These were the so-called rabbit candles, candles in rabbit-shape, that are widely used in Tartar settlement areas. From time immemorial the Tartars have considered rabbits to be both bearers as well as keepers of light. And thus, since earliest times, candles there have taken the form of rabbits. Even today one can find rabbit candles in every southern Russian grocery store. This rabbit candle, these light-giving rabbits, were the first, and for a long time only, things Joseph Beuys saw and perceived when awaking from out of unconsciousness.

The fact that not only the animal fat and felt blankets but the rabbit as well came from his experience with the Tartars is often overlooked and little described, even though Beuys himself made no secret of it.

Literature:

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